

Chris Lyttle

KEY:

A: Anne Marie
M: Marina
C: Chris Lyttle

M: Hello, everyone, and welcome to today's talk, and I'm delighted to introduce Chris Lyttle Chair of the Education Committee in the Assembly to talk to us today and to answer some questions about his role as Chair of the Education Committee. He's joined by myself, Marina and Anne Marie from the Education Service. And we're going to record this and post it on our website for you, hoping that it will help your study of the work of the Assembly.

Chris has been Chair of the Education Committee since the Assembly became operational again in January 2020. So he has over a year's experience in that role now. And before that, he was deputy chair of a committee. So I'm going to begin just by asking you to say hello to everybody, Chris, and then we can get to the chat.

C: Thanks Marina delighted to be with you today. So, yeah, my name is Chris Lyttle, I'm an MLA for East Belfast with the Alliance Party and Chairperson of the Education Committee.

The role of the Education Committee is to scrutinise and support the work of the Education Minister and the Department of Education across a wide range of issues from early years to primary post primary education, EA, youth services and a wide range of bodies are involved in that as well.

The Department of Education has the second largest budget of the Northern Ireland Executive, so it's a really important department. Our committee is made up of nine MLAs across the five Executive parties and we meet on a weekly basis and as you can imagine in the last year, have had a really busy schedule given the centrality of education during the pandemic.

M: OK, thank you very much, Chris. And so and you've mentioned this year and education is certainly in the news a lot, and we're going to have lots of questions, kind of specific questions from students really about that towards the end of this session. But if you could just give us a flavour of some of the issues that you have dealt with during that year.

C: Yeah. So in January 2020 when, the Education Committee was re-established that was on the back of the New decade, New approach talks and agreement and that had been a central aspect of the agreement. So there were some key commitments coming out of that around an independent review of education, a panel on educational underachievement, addressing teachers pay settlement and also looking at school budgets. And so there was a really important body of work to undertake as well as special educational needs.

The first months of 2020 we probably spent most of our time looking at systemic failings in the Education Authority on special educational needs. So we had a number of evidence sessions

with senior officials from the Education Authority and the Department of Education on those particular issues. And they had set out an action plan for improving special educational needs provision. So we had a number of sessions with those officials seeking regular updates about the progress.

The pandemic obviously arrived in around March 2020. And from that point, we shifted into dealing with urgent COVID related matters only. We had a weekly Department of Education situational report. Departments SitRep it was referred to as for short. That involved frequently the Minister and almost every week, certainly the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education giving us regular updates on school closure, partial school closure, key worker children access to school, remote learning provisions, free school meal provisions during partial school closure, child care and emergency child care provision.

So there were a wide range of issues that we needed to be updated on a weekly basis. And it provided the Department with a public communication tool, I guess because our meetings are obviously broadcast and it also provided the public through us as representatives with an important accountability mechanism on the Departments action during the pandemic.

We've obviously been dealing with a wide range of issues since then. Examinations and assessments have been a significant issue last year and this year. Post primary transfer another significant issue as well, mental health. So the Department has been working on an emotional health and well-being framework that we've received regular briefings on. And then we can also take evidence from outside bodies such as the youth led Elephant in the Room campaign on youth mental health. And as I said today, we heard from a wide range of children and young people's organisations, including the recently established Secondary School Students Union of Northern Ireland. So we will hold the Department to account on those key issues and we'll try to take evidence from outside bodies as well to ensure that those actions are in line with what people want to see from the Department.

M: OK, thanks, Chris, for that. And can you give us any examples of impact that the committee has had on all of those areas or some of those areas?

C: So self-assessment is always tough enough, I don't know how favourable I can be to the committee. But I do think that we have played an important role in holding the Department and the Minister to account during the pandemic and on the outside issues as well.

I suppose in relation to examinations. Last year, the committee engaged with the Minister, engaged with CCEA the curriculum for examination and assessment body in Northern Ireland. And there was a lot of controversy around an algorithm that was used as part of the exams assessment last year. We had a number of key evidence sessions with the Minister for Education, where I think on the morning of our evidence session, he was saying that there would be no change of that algorithm approach to centre assessed grades. And that afternoon there had been a change of approach to centre assessed grades. So I think we had an influence in terms of highlighting the unfairness of that algorithm approach in relation to assessments last year. And I think we did have some influence on the Minister change of direction in that regard, although there was a collective public concern in relation to that issue as well.

On another occasion where the Minister has not heeded, the committee would possibly be in relation to post primary transfer. We as a committee, we wrote to schools across Northern Ireland. In May 2020, we conducted a survey that had 8,500 responses during the summer, and then we had a motion in November. And that motion called on the Education Minister to bring forward a contingency plan

should testing not be possible, which regrettably, as we know, has not been the case. The Minister didn't intervene I don't think it could be said that he has brought forward a contingency plan in that regard and instead schools have been required to set criteria themselves. And that has seen a wide and varied range of criteria being used across the board. And whilst I don't think it was ever going to be easy to resolve that particular issue, I think a common contingency criteria may have led to some clearer understanding and way forward in relation to that particular issue. So we couldn't persuade the Minister to intervene on that particular issue, unfortunately.

M: OK, thank you very much for those examples, Chris. And in terms of COVID19 over the last year, how has that affected the way in which the committee works?

C: Practically speaking, we've recently adjusted to be a fully virtual Committee. So we use video conferencing now as members to come together as the committee and also to take evidence. I think we had five different children and young people's organisations represented at our Committee this morning via the Starleaf platform that we use. So that that has been helpful to ensure that we have continuity as a committee that we've been able to meet and that we've still been able to take evidence from a wide range of organisations.

But as I say, from a work programme point of view, we have had to be very focussed on the urgent issues arising from COVID, which has given us slightly less scope to be more proactive in exploring, you know, forward facing issues than being reactive to the big emerging and urgent issues presented to us by COVID.

M: And do you think StarLeaf is something that you will continue to use, possibly even when our situation returns to a more kind of settled, normal situation again?

C: Yeah, I suppose I'm on the inside of it, so I try to take feedback from people watching the broadcasts and I know that we're still learning.

So the audio and the visual at times can be interrupted, which is not ideal. It's important you're platforming people. You're giving a voice to people. So it's really important that they can be seen and heard when they're making those really important presentations. So I think, like everything, we can make improvements.

But I do think that it has served a purpose in challenging times to make sure that the Committee function continues. And we have members of the committee from right across Northern Ireland, people giving evidence from right across Northern Ireland so there are practical benefits to being able to dial in in that virtual way.

M: OK, thank you. And you mentioned, Chris, that there are five parties represented on the committee, the five executive parties, and does that bring with it any challenges? And could you perhaps also say something about your role as Chair in that regard?

C: Yeah, I think we've worked together well, obviously, Committees, Assembly, Committees can take criticism at times because they are frequently made up of MLAs whose party are members of the Executive. But I would like to think if anybody watches in on our committee, you will see that that that makes us no less robust in our scrutiny of the Minister or the Department.

Obviously, there will be a situation where you have MLAs for whom the Minister as a party colleague. And I think if we're being honest, that that might adjust lines of questioning slightly. Perhaps those of us who aren't party colleagues are slightly more robust in our scrutiny role than our support role. And perhaps some of the MLAs for whom the Minister is a colleague focus slightly more on the support rather than the scrutiny role. But where we are a collective, as I say, we've got nine members and I think we do perform that that scrutiny role well.

As Chair I will have Chairpersons business to conduct. So I get to bring issues to the committee and I try to make sure that all members have equal time in their questioning of our witnesses, whether that's the Departments, Minister or outside organisations. And we will meet to strategy plan to forward work plan to make sure that the issues that we have on our agenda are issues that the members have collectively agreed are issues that we want to work on. And as I said last summer, we were we were able to agree on a public survey on post primary transfer an issue that different parties will have different views and different party positions on. But we still manage to agree that it was an issue of importance that we should engage publicly on and provide an important role in that regard.

M: Thank you. And in terms of engagement with the Minister as a committee how have you found that relationship between committee and Minister?

C: I think that's always going to be a robust relationship at times. And it should be we have an important role to hold the Minister to account. I think the you know, there is still work to be done in terms of establishing an opposition in the Assembly. So the committees have a really important role to take to provide that opposition, that scrutiny function as well as constructive support.

So the Minister has attended our committee reasonably regularly. And I remember a time in the last mandate when I was deputy chairperson of OFMDFM Committee, when the First Minister and deputy First Minister hadn't attended our Committee for some period of months. So I have to acknowledge that the Minister attends our committee reasonably regularly, certainly during COVID. But as I said at the outset, when we were receiving weekly situational reports, that would have been fairly regular.

Does he always come at the times when we need him to come or ask him to come? Perhaps not. During the Christmas break there were a number of Assembly recalls in order to get updates from the Minister on some key issues in terms of school restart in January. Was there going to be a return to school or would it be remote learning? We had to resort to a few, Assembly recalls, in order to get an oral statement from the Minister. And as I said, it's not always possible we get the Minister to the committee when you would like to, or indeed to get the substantive answers that you would like at times. But that's for the committee to take forward.

M: OK, thank you. And you've said that COVID, of course, and all the issues around education have dominated the committees agenda. Looking forward how do you see your work with the committees work schedule?

C: Yes. So we will continue to prioritise special educational needs provision. And undoubtedly, as has been well documented, the Education Authority has not met the needs of children with special educational needs in the way that it should have. Whether that's the timely delivery of statements of special educational needs, whether that's the placement of children in special

schools there have been a number of high profile problems there. So we'll continue to focus on that.

Recently, we had a session on integrated education on, as I said, mental health, emotional health and wellbeing framework, which will continue to be a priority for us. And the independent review of education will be high on the agenda as well. But those are issues in relation to COVID are going to be with us for some time in terms of the phased return the school. The examinations and assessments is a real emerging issue this week as well.

So, there are there going to be a number of urgent COVID related issues for some time to come. And we hope that those more strategic issues, such as the independent review of education, the review of integrated education, special educational needs reform will be running in parallel. And we'll continue to keep an eye on those also.

M: Great, thank you.

So we're going to go now to the questions which have been sent in to us by schools, and I'd like to thank Carrickfergus Grammar and Lismore Comprehensive and St Ronan's for sending us in questions and I'm going to hand over Anne Marie to begin these questions

A: Thank you very much, Marina. And thanks, Chris.

Chris, the first set of questions that we had you've kind of covered in terms of giving good examples of how the committee has successfully reversed a Ministers decision or, you know, in terms of the algorithm and occasions where you may not have been as successful, maybe with the post primary transfer.

But in terms of scrutiny, Chris, I wonder, you've mentioned that you feel the Committee is working quite well in terms of scrutiny. I wonder, could you outline what are the main challenges when it comes to effective scrutiny? And given that our audience is kind of school based and there's a lot of talk about grades, what grade would you give the education committee for its scrutiny this year?

C: (Laughs)

Self-assessment is never an easy exercise. I'd like to say we've worked hard, Anne Marie, you know, B+? There's always room for improvement, isn't there? But, yeah, I like to think we've covered a wide range of issues on a regular basis. And even during the summer, we endeavoured to make sure that we decreased the time when we weren't in the Assembly functional. So, yeah, and I think we've got MLAs, who are really passionate about education on the committee as well. So hopefully we've worked well together and we've represented the concerns that exist in relation to education effectively.

The other question about scrutiny. Could you repeat that?

A: I'm sorry, Chris, in terms of what are the challenges and in terms of getting effective scrutiny, what do you come up against as a committee?

C: Yeah, so key challenges are always accessing information in a timely way from the Department and in the way that you want it as well. And so we will there be an Assembly Committee Clerk who will correspond with the department on our behalf and we will, after evidence sessions of

the committee, will agree actions and the Clerk will write to the relevant officials in relation to those. And that I think a challenge is always getting the information that you want in a timely way. And also following the responses with a really busy schedule and you've got to keep a close record of the information that you have requested or the concerns that you have raised, because the issues can move along pretty quickly. So you need to have a good record to make sure that you're following up on those issues that you've raised.

And I suppose, as I said as well, making sure that you get as much time with the Minister as regularly as possible. With nine members of the committee in reality, we get about 5 to 10 minutes per member when the Minister is actually with us and some of the Ministers are reasonably good at giving you the information that they wish to give you and not always the information that you wish to get from them. So, it's important that you coordinate your questions well and you get as much information as you can in order to play that scrutiny and support role. You need information to be able to get proposals in response.

A: OK, thanks for that, Chris. You've talked there about the Minister and how frequently the Minister comes to the committee. And a school has asked, do you think the committee has been successful in shaping the education Ministers approach to schools and to education?

C: We've certainly tried our best and as I said, I do recall a few changes of decision whether or not that could be attributed to the committee or to wider influences as well. But I remember in March, 2020 sitting in the Senate chamber of the Assembly asking the Education Minister for at the very least, a plan towards the partial school closure that was going to be likely to have to occur. And the Education Minister adamantly telling us that there is not going to be a date for school closure that morning and then that afternoon, announcing that there was going to be partial school closures and then having to move to what that was going to look like in terms of which key worker children could attend and other range of issues. So I think we I think we've influenced the approach, have we influenced it in as planned and an organised and a coordinated way as we would have wished for perhaps not.

I think we also raised concerns in relation to that approach to exams last year as well. Regrettably the reverse decision from the Minister was also late in the day in that regard. And we think that there is concern that some of those decisions have been left to later than we would have liked. So we have sought to ensure that the Education Minister has taken a planned approach to responding to the challenges presented by COVID. But perhaps some of those decisions have been taken later than we would have liked.

A: OK, thanks for that Chris. And my final question is, again, going back to something that you've mentioned - a school has said, acknowledging that you're a member of Alliance and Alliance's position on integrated education and then in your role as Chair of the Committee for Education. What commentary can you give on integrated education and how you see it and going forward in terms of the narrative in Northern Ireland about education?

C: So we held a themed session of the Education Committee only last week I think it was, on integrated education. We had the Integrated Education Fund presenting to the committee on a wide range of issues and providing an update in relation to the growth of integrated education, which has been significant when you consider that it only started in 1981, Lagan College the first integrated school celebrating a 40th anniversary this year, is one of, if not the most oversubscribed school in Northern Ireland.

We also heard from UNESCO Ulster University. The UNESCO Centre from Ulster University around some of the key issues to seeing a more integrated education system in Northern Ireland. And one of those was the current exemption of teachers from the fair employment legislation that exists in Northern Ireland and also a certificate that is required for the teaching of religious education in Northern Ireland.

So we're platforming those issues at the Education Committee. The Education Minister had also commissioned an independent review of integrated education. So we've received updates in relation to that. A lot of the proposals contained in that review have moved into consideration on the independent review of education in its entirety. So we'll be following that closely,

From an Alliance party point of view, very briefly, my colleague Kellie Armstrong, MLA, excuse me, will be bringing forward a private member's bill on integrated education. So an integrated education bill will be coming before the Assembly very soon. And the Education Committee will perform an important role in the consideration stage of the passage of that bill. So there's going to be some interesting developments, important developments there for integrated education at the Assembly and the Education Committee.

A: Chris, thank you very much. I'll hand over to Marina, who I know has a few more.

M: I'm going to take you back to some kind of, I suppose, current issues in relation to school exams this year and also when young people are returning to school. So, we have some questions here, one of which is what is your current stance in relation to recent comments by the Minister that all pupils should return to school before Easter?

C: Yeah, so in addition to being Chair of the Education Committee I'm a parent of school age children and a youth sports coach, so I'm acutely aware in all of those roles of the severity of the impact of school closure on children and on families. So obviously, the priority for the Executive and for all elected representatives is to get pupils back to school full time as soon as possible.

The medical guidance, the health and medical guidance was towards a phased approach. So delighted to see those nursery, P1 to P3 children back in school this week. Those smiles on those faces, you know warm the heart and they are real an encouragement at this stage of a pandemic where people are reaching the end of their resilience. But we've got to maintain that resilience.

I guess that the UK Chief Medical Officer yesterday warned that any drop in the guard and any non-compliance with those restrictions could see a surge indeed a too sharp a move out of lockdown, could see a surge. And we have to guard and protect the gains that have been made very, very challengingly by a lockdown. We have to protect that.

But, yes, the hope would certainly be for me that all pupils would be able to return after Easter. I'm not entirely sure if Minister Weir has said that all pupils should return to school before Easter. And it's certainly up to this point, not a proposal that has put to the Executive. It might be this week.

I think key to all pupils returning is that it has to be safe. And I think the Education Minister and the committee, Education Committee have made this clear to him that more can be done in that regard. We would like to have seen much more prompt roll out of school testing and also

of special school staff vaccination programmes, the two issues that were raised by the Education Committee today. And we'll be writing to the Minister about ventilation in the schools as well. So we need to see resources for safety measures in our schools. And I think that's going to be key to getting pupils back as soon as possible in addition to the health guidance.

M: OK, thank you, Chris, for that. And in terms of exams, we have a question here which you have already referred to. Why has it taken so long for a plan to be in place in relation to exams? The question says that a plan is only coming out now and even this plan which has taken some time, has been met with some opposition. Why was the Minister, the Department and the Exam Board not working on this since last year so that it was ready?

C: The honest answer is that I don't know and that there are real concerns emerging in relation to this. The CCEA obviously announced the guidance for the approach to assessment this year at the weekend. And there has been a really concerning reaction to that, both from pupils and teachers alike.

The evidence we took at the Education Committee this morning from children and young people said that the proposals on Friday feel like exams by the back door. And we had the Secondary Students Union saying that some people are scheduled to commence assessments immediately on return to school on the 22nd March, further to a period, a long period of remote learning. And they're concerned about the impact that that might have on the emotional health and well-being of children and young people. And obviously, the mental health champion has urged that a return to school would focus on well-being rather than assessment. We heard from one contributor today that it's that there's a possibility that some pupils could be setting up to 40 assessments in total at the end of the school year.

So the concern is such that people are calling for a change in direction. They're calling for wider evidence to be submissible for assessment and a greater reliance on teacher assessment. So we have the Education Minister scheduled to be with the Committee in two weeks time, and we will be engaging with the Northern Ireland Teaching Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, and indeed CCEA itself on this matter, because the reaction has been really concerning to the proposals that have been finally announced in relation to exams only this week.

M: And just so that, you know, as chair of the Education committee, we did have a question from Lismore Comprehensive and St Ronan's sent exactly about that on which you've answered in relation to the impact that a thought of assessment and what's in store for them when they go back to school, year 12 to 14. What the impact that will have on their mental health. So I think there is a concern about that.

And then finally, we have again quite up to date, up to date questions about the actual exams. Will pupils be able to challenge their grade if they feel it is not what they would have achieved in the official exam? And also can you reassure parents and pupils that grades will be determined, which reflect the challenges faced by pupils in recent times and their true potential and ability? So again, reflecting, I think, the worries of all students.

C: And to pick up on the last question as well, in terms of timings all feedback from all children and young people that we've engaged with is that the uncertainty that was created in the length of time that it has taken to make announcements and then to follow through on them. The poor communications - the Youth Forum had called for regular youth press conferences. I

think that could have been a way forward to try and communicate better. But ultimately, decisions aren't being made in a timely way. It's difficult to support them.

So the feedback we're given is that uncertainty has affected children and young people's mental health. We have to give assurances that those grades have to be on the basis of individual ability. Of course, and the Minister in some of his previous statements said that the grades this year will have to take into account the experiences, the challenges that have been encountered and also be comparable to the grades that were given last year as well. He mentioned instruments like COVID Tariffs. So if people had experienced COVID related absences from being able to engage with schoolwork, that there would be a degree of tariff on grades. He is yet to give detail to that. I appreciate people's concern in March of the academic year that level of detail should really be in place.

M: OK, well, thank you very much, Chris. I think we covered all the questions, haven't we Anne Marie? I'd like to thank again the teachers and students for forwarding those questions to us to put to you. And thank you for taking time, I know you had your Education Committee meeting this morning, and it went on for quite a few hours. And you came straight to this meeting to talk to us. So thank you very much, Chris, for...

C: And thank you Marina for inviting me to do this. I thank the students and the teachers for engaging directly with the Assembly in this way. I think it's really positive to do that. I studied politics myself at A Level and I think with the Assembly established and in place and the Executive, in place and Committees in place that makes total sense for classes and pupils to engage directly with the Assembly, to supplement the learning from the textbooks and journals and other resources that schools are able to provide. And if I have missed any issues there or not answer questions in a way that people would've liked I'd be glad for my contact details to be provided or engage directly with any of the schools that are involved with the education programme.

A: Great, thank you, Chris.

M: Chris, that's great. You'll definitely be invited back. OK, thank you.

C: Thanks very much, everyone.

A: Bye Bye, thanks so much.

M: Thanks, Chris.

C: Thank you. Bye bye.